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The Open University

TOWNS

HIDDEN PASTS, MULTIPLE FUTURES

My town, your town, whose town?

With the exception of residents in some of the more far flung islands around the British Isles, few of us in the UK and Ireland live far from a town. Of course the label 'town' covers a rich and diverse assortment of settlements of vastly different sizes, with different character and image, and with sharply divergent histories and possible futures. Towns are places of wealth and prosperity, of poverty and disadvantage, places where different groups of people come together or are separated out. Towns offer a visible portrayal of many of the day-to-day activities and rhythms of life that both reflect and shape our world. In this respect they offer in colourful and distinctive ways a window into society and our social world more generally.

Defining what a town is, however, is perhaps a thankless and indeed a fruitless task. While it may be easy to assume that such an issue matters little in the UK today, defining a place as a town or a city in the past was often a matter of strategic political, economic and military importance. Today we can find towns that prefer to see themselves as cities (the 'Fair City' of Perth for instance, or Wrexham, where a bid for city status is to be made in 2012). Other towns may perhaps be little more than large villages – and across the UK and Ireland there is a rich tapestry of seaside and coastal towns, industrial and ex-industrial towns. Some

towns merge into larger neighbouring cities: the town of Paisley, Scotland's largest town, and the city of Glasgow is one illustration of this, with many others dotted across the large urban conurbations of contemporary Britain. And then there are 'standalone', more rural towns: Athlone in the Republic of Ireland, Totnes in Devon or Corby in the East Midlands of England being some good examples of such, though an issue arises when we attempt to define 'rural' in this regard. Corby, for instance, sits amongst a hinterland of other similar-sized towns, a pattern that occurs in many other places in the British Isles. We do not have to look far either for towns that were the conscious outcomes of attempts to plan or to build the perfect settlement: planned towns and 'new' towns represent some of the best examples of being planned on a grid pattern in Norman times, with Ludlow in Shropshire a good early example of such.

In the *Town with Nicholas Crane* series we consider many of the ways in which towns have come to be the places they are today; places that, while shaped by often very different histories, are also looking towards futures that might be very different but which are all characterised by uncertainty.

In exploring towns, a sense of the past is vital if we are to grasp where that town has travelled from – and what its likely trajectories might be. Take a seaside town such

as Scarborough; its glory days as a hugely popular seaside resort are now mainly in the past. What path should it follow in trying to create a different future but one that builds upon its rich past as a resort?

But a sense of the past is not all that is required if we seek to create a more informed understanding of towns. Towns are places made by their wider links. In this respect towns are open places, places shaped by their past – but also by their geography. We can talk of *towns as places of wider interconnections*, though of course we also have to appreciate that for some towns the erosion of past connections – disconnections from previously important trading links, for instance – have led to periods of significant economic decline. Other towns have lost previously long-held political status as county towns, in the process losing what clout they may have once enjoyed and which gave them a certain standing or status.

An important and often overlooked dimension of interconnections is that *towns are also places of migration*, that is of in-migration and of out-migration. Can we make sense of the likes of Corby today, for instance, without appreciating the impact of large-scale Scottish migration to the town in the 1920s and 1930s? Will many of the towns in Britain today – where recent immigration from Eastern Europe has led to a much more diverse population, introducing new cultures and lifestyles – become very different places in the future as a result? *Population diversity* is a key feature of towns; historically, towns have been formed through different waves of migration and the loss of population as economic and political fortunes have waned. Uncovering population shifts can open up new ways of making sense of particular towns.

That we also refer here to the political standing of towns reminds us that *towns are places of power* – that is, of unequal power. Certain towns may be more powerful than others; that is, they may be administrative centres, or be economically powerful or have a cultural standing that lends them power. But that should not disguise the fact that towns are divided – that power lies in relatively few hands and, increasingly in many towns across the UK and Ireland, power is reflected in the activities of supermarkets, property developers and the like, whose plans and aspirations can often conflict with that of other groups of people.

Whose town is it? My town? Your town?

Deceptively simple questions, perhaps – but questions that open up a range of important issues for our understanding of what makes towns the places that they are!

Towns are by definition hubs of connections; they exist because human populations deem them to be important places to move to and from, and in which to settle. Towns that populate the contemporary landscape do so because they have managed to continually make and remake social, political, economic and cultural connections with other places and people over time and maintain their significance and relevance. Each town will have many and different connections: products of the historical and contemporary activities and networks that help shape and define their development.

Connections are created in different ways. They can come into existence through conscious planning, as in the case of Totnes, Ludlow, Perth and Scarborough. The first of these was a Saxon Burh, created to defend England against the Vikings, while Ludlow was a planned town to defend and dominate the contested border connections between England and Wales. Perth's planned town was based on its connections to the navigable waters of the Tay and its strategic location as a hub for connecting the central belt of Scotland with the Highlands. In Scarborough's case, the significance of its

connections emerged gradually over time. What unites them all is that the sites of towns develop or are chosen because they offer specific geographical and strategic advantages, offering access to resources, natural transport corridors such as rivers or coastlines, or a site of natural defence or domination over the surrounding countryside.

Over time, the original connections that gave a town its significance may change, fragment or indeed be strengthened. While Perth's location by the Tay may be less strategically significant today, its role as a major north-south transport hub for road and rail transport remains important, while the economic connections it sustains through tourism have become increasingly important. Scarborough's castle is evidence of its medieval military and trading importance in the context of the North Sea and a north-south axis, yet it is the east-west links with the big industrial cities of Yorkshire and the north-west that have defined so much of its social, cultural and economic life for the last century and which make it the town it is now.

Connections are invariably multiple. In some contexts they are replicated and enshrined in the often mundane rhythms of everyday life – towns as places of government, administration and justice, of employment, shopping, culture and education. In some contexts connections are made, broken and remade over time, as in the case of the annual festivals that towns put on seeking to distinguish and differentiate themselves from others. Some connections are historical or make claims to some historical event, but are also prominent in the way that towns are laid out, or in the existence of names given to buildings – the Palace of Scone in Perth is testament to its royal historical connections.

Some connections are shared while others will be specific to certain communities within towns. In the case of Totnes, it is the development of the Transition Towns movement that has connected some communities within the town with more than 400 other places globally that have adopted the Transition

approach. For Ludlow an increasingly significant connection is that of food, as it attracts professionals and foodies from all over the country. For Scarborough it is virtual connections that have become increasingly important, as its creative and online industries have become economically significant.

Importantly, connections co-exist alongside disconnections, where different populations and parts of towns fail to engage with each other or are distant from others by class, gender or ethnicity. Historical and contemporary disconnections can be significant in framing people's perceptions of what is a desirable or undesirable place to live and what is acceptable or unacceptable. Equally, towns can be places of competing connections where the different segments within a town compete to prioritise certain connections over others, shaping a town's future by orientating it in a specific direction.

So we can see towns as places of increasing and overlapping connections. As modes of transport and communication have intensified, the rapidity of the everyday interactions that characterise the connections between people within

towns has been joined by the increasing regularity of more distant and virtual connections.

Towns are hubs, where people come together to undertake a wide variety of interactions – cultural, political, economic and social. In essence they are places where multiple human interactions and relationships are made and remade on a daily basis. Migration – the movement of people on a permanent or temporary basis – forms a vital part of this process of social interaction.

Migration can be viewed in multiple ways: as positive or negative, both for those who arrive or leave and those who stay in a place; or in terms of the networks that begin, develop and decline between those migrating and the places they leave for and go to. Historical and contemporary migrations impact on the social, economic and cultural character of places of migration. Often for economic

reasons, migraton can also have a cultural, political or social impetus behind it.

As towns expand and contract, the movement of people is often one of the first signs of this process taking place. Perth's renewed growth as one of the key focal points for accessing the central Highlands in recent times has seen it become a hub for Polish migration, as well as for those from the central belt of Scotland moving for the perceived quality of life.

Demand for goods and services can create a need which very often can only be provided by migration. Similarly, as Totnes has revived its historical role as a hub for alternative ways of living, people with a world view sympathetic to those already living there have moved into the area. The movement of people with a restaurant and food background to Ludlow has led to the town becoming a hot spot for artisan food production and restaurants.

Migration can fill crucial gaps in the labour market and migrants are often, though not always, young. They can bring new energy to an area, expanding

its cultural and social life, bringing demand for new shops and services, and reviving and repopulating run-down neighbourhoods. Migration can provide jobs and new opportunities for people unavailable elsewhere and a source of income for the places from which people have migrated.

However, migration can also have negative connotations. Many migrants have been propelled to move because of unemployment in their places of origin. Being differentiated by religion, ethnicity or race can become a source of contention and a target for abuse in the communities into which they have moved. Power seldom rests with migrant communities and they often have to take the jobs at the lower end of the labour market, which are characterised by poor conditions of service and pay. Migrant workers are over-represented in the insecure seasonal labour force that is employed in the tourism industry in Scarborough and among the agricultural workforce in Perthshire, for example.

Migration might also occur because migrants may be people who are not wanted elsewhere. For instance, migrants came to Newry and Perth because of, respectively, famine conditions in other parts of Ireland and the Highland clearances. Significantly, migration may have a negative impact on a migrant community's place of origin, depriving it of young people and its labour force, with subsequent impacts on a place's ability to maintain itself as a sustainable community.

Migration to towns can then have significant impacts, creating and recreating both physical and psychological networks as successive generations of migrant communities establish links with other places.

The historical links between Poland and Scotland through the emigration of Scots to Poland in the 18th Century have been re-established through the reverse migration of Poles to Scotland during the Second World War and, more contemporaneously, since Poland joined the European Union. Perth and Scarborough both have namesakes in other countries as a consequence of out-migration maintaining contacts with those places through twinning and diaspora ties.

Migrants leave their traces in terms of language, food, place and street names, and indeed the shape of towns. Newry, for example, has an English Street and an Irish Street, indicating historical patterns of migration by English people to the city.

Towns, then, are sites of in-migration and out-migration, and it is the impact of this movement of people that often provides one of the most obvious and tangible signs of a town's economic, social and cultural fortunes.

MIGRATION

Towns are diverse places: while they may share certain features, no two towns are completely alike. They are places with different histories, contrasting geographies and their populations will be structured and diverse in different ways too. Towns are places with differing and multiple rhythms of work, lifestyle and cultures, and they may be distinctive too in terms of their wider interconnections.

These networks of interconnections, or links, help to shape towns, making them the places that they are. Together with their unique histories and geographies, these wider links also serve to make towns places of diversity.

To speak of towns as places of diversity enables us to capture economic, social, political and cultural difference within a particular town. Towns are places that reflect different economic positions, and the structure of their working populations may differ considerably. In this respect towns are also places that are full of class differences and divisions; the textile workers and mill owners of Paisley in the west of Scotland, for example, and in many other mill towns across the UK and Ireland. Different housing tenures, often reflecting sharply distinctive class positions, also exemplify the diverse social and economic groups that may live in a town, though all too often in inhabiting distinctive areas within towns.

We can think of Ludlow in Shropshire, close to the border between England and Wales. In Ludlow, the population of the Sandpits housing estate may live alongside more affluent areas with their much sought after and highly expensive houses. Yet the different groups may be relationally distant, sharing little more than being residents of one particular town.

That diversity is also a product of wider links highlights too that migration has helped to make towns the places

we understand them to be. Historic and more recent patterns and processes of migration have left their imprints on all towns: the multicultural and multi-ethnic characteristics of towns contribute in rich and varying ways to their diversity. Patterns of migration have at times and in different ways also been related to and overlapped with an array of different lifestyles, and have helped to create a
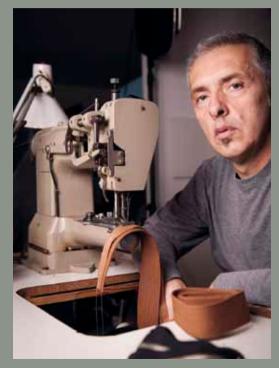

DIVERSITY

rich tapestry of diverse cultural forms. This has also been enhanced by the steady liberalisation of society, which has encouraged other lifestyles and ways of living to emerge.

Such social differentiation is also marked by the gendered characteristics of towns, often clearly reflected in the dominant patterns and rhythms of work and employment. Historically, many industrial (or now ex-industrial) towns were typified by male dominated workforces; although in some of the towns where cotton and textile manufacture was prominent, female employment was long a significant feature of the local labour market.

In the contemporary period, long-standing gendered patterns of employment may have largely, although not entirely, broken down. As towns look to re-image and reposition themselves as places where services, retail, entertainment and knowledge work are the basis of future prosperity, older forms of work are broken down and new ones are forged, and with them comes new types of employment.

Towns are places with multiple and contrasting possible futures. But these futures may mean different things to different social groups who have competing views of such futures, and different degrees of choice in the making of those futures. How far can retail-led forms of employment and development, exemplified by the steady spread and

growing dominance of supermarkets, offer a meaningful and sustainable future for everyone, young, old, affluent and disadvantaged?

Many towns may increasingly be viewed as little more than clones, with identikit supermarkets, shopping malls and high streets full of the same chain stores. However, this should not hide the fact that towns are full of diversity – a diversity that is as much a product of a town's wider connections as it is of its history and location.

DIVERSITY

Towns are at the frontline of immense economic, social and cultural change. Such changes throw up a wide range of questions about the ability of a particular town to respond to such changes in ways that offer a sustainable and viable future. But as towns look ahead, the matter of power comes into centre stage. Are some towns better placed, economically, socially, politically and geographically, to cope with and adapt to changes? Are some towns more powerful than others, better connected to economic, cultural and political networks?

Networks vary in significance and in the quality of power that they can confer. But towns that are connected to economically powerful networks — for instance, through trading and transport links — may be better placed than those towns whose power has eroded over time, as past connections diminish or fragment completely. Does participation or involvement in the Transition Towns movement, to offer one case, deliver power to the towns in question?

Of course, we can think of participation and involvement in different ways. Towns are full of power — unequal power. Is it

towns that are powerful, or particular individuals or social groups within a town? Can everyone, each social group, share in the shaping of a town's future — and share equally?

An emerging trend across the UK and Ireland in recent times is the increasing ability of corporate groups, supermarkets and developers to influence the future direction of towns. This is reflected in their shaping of plans for developments, housing, roads and public services, etc. By contrast the voices of the less powerful and disadvantaged, while ever present, are all too often overlooked

or marginalised. Opposition to large-scale developments such as motorway construction can only too readily be dismissed by those in powerful positions.

Whose are the voices that are being heard as towns are re-imagined and rebranded? How are towns sold — and what

POWER

is it within and about them that is being sold? What and whose stories and histories are called upon — and which are hidden, relegated from view? In this respect we can think of towns as places in which power circulates in and between different social groups. This does not mean that all groups share in the shaping of a town's future or destiny, or that all towns have the ability to shape that future. Indeed, it may be people and groups outside a town that are key to defining what it is and where it is heading.
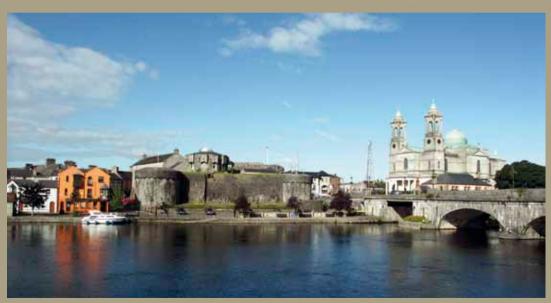
The symbols of power are all too apparent in towns. Town halls and council offices offer some of the most visible

manifestations – but so do supermarket and other property developments. In a number of towns, such as Athlone in Ireland or Totnes in south-west England, the presence of castles speaks of very different forms of power in the historic past – while reminding us that towns have often been places where power has been fought over. The location of a town near to or on a border (such as Newry in Northern Ireland or Ludlow or Wrexham on the borders between England and Wales), or on important river locations, also serves as a reminder that the sources of power may vary considerably.

Towns are therefore places where power matters in the future as much as it has done in the past. Power is made, remade, renewed and re-established. The inequalities of power are part of what also makes towns places that are rich in social contention and struggle.

POWER

Towns are dynamic and ever-changing places. They are the product of history, of wider interconnections and of different migrations. On their own and collectively they represent important parts of the landscape of the British Isles. Reflecting and helping to shape the multiple patterns, rhythms and tensions of everyday life, towns face different and indeed uncertain futures, as do different groups living within towns. Towns therefore are exciting places.

We all have some idea as to what constitutes a town, or what makes a place a town. Of course such ideas are open to debate, and as we have seen here some towns think that they are cities and should be viewed as such, and some cities may be little more than 'big' towns! Particular towns or groups of towns may be seen as having a distinctive character, a sense of place and identity; while in other towns this is less marked. Some towns may have more autonomy and political leverage to shape their own future in ways that might not be possible in other towns. In this regard we need to keep questions of power to the fore as we attempt to uncover some of the richness that towns represent.

However, behind the question of what makes a town a town lie a rich array of complex, dynamic and ever-changing processes and factors that work to shape and reshape not only towns themselves, or the places and people who interact with them, but also the wider societies of which they form a significant part.

The study of towns reflects in some ways the study of many of the key social, economic, political and cultural processes and relations that help to make the UK and Ireland the societies that they are. By focusing on towns, important and society-wide questions are immediately thrown into sharp focus: issues around sustainability, equality, social justice, identity, belongings and exclusions.

These issues affect the entire population, albeit in vastly differing and unequal ways. However, towns provide a means of exploring these questions in detail, offering up in the process a number of different ways of explaining why things are as they are and for suggesting ways and approaches to how problems and issues can be made and repaired. Using some of the key concepts from social sciences and other academic approaches, we have taken the themes of diversity,

connections, migration and power to 'open up' towns for investigation. There are many different ways to study towns but through these themes we are able to see towns as living and ever-changing places, where multiple stories, ways of life and ways of doing things come together, sometimes clashing or conflicting but giving a strong sense of the towns' richness as places worthy of investigation. There is no single story awaiting your discovery, but many stories.

Together with its associated materials on The Open University's OpenLearn website and an interactive game, the *Town with Nicholas Crane* series aims to offer some new ways of approaching the study of towns. In this booklet we have flagged particular towns, but only as illustrations of the wider themes and questions with which we are concerned. Taking the approach of *Town with Nicholas Crane* we invite you to discover your own town, or a town you know well or which is close to where you live, and uncover the richness of its past, its wider links and the different forms of diversity which help to make it the place that it is. Some of these may be more apparent than others; some of the richness may be well hidden, only glimpses of which may be visible. Some deep digging might be required to get at the hidden aspects of town life, past and present, in the process providing a sense of the different directions of travel in which different towns and social groups may find themselves. Go forth and discover towns!

For more information on *Town with Nicholas Crane,* please visit The Open University's OpenLearn website. It includes essays on a range of towns from across the UK and Ireland, all contributing to our understanding of the kinds of places that towns are in general – and the uniqueness of individual towns.

CONCLUSION

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Understanding society – Y177

Whether you're thinking of further study in the social sciences or you're just interested in finding out about some of the profound changes that society is experiencing, this course has much to offer. It introduces concepts and debates within the social sciences, covering topics like families, culture, global markets, migrant labour, community and social movements.

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This course invites you into the world of politics in a fresh and accessible way, using a wide variety of case studies drawn from the UK and beyond. It sheds light on the inner workings of power, decision making and protest, and it covers politics from parliament to the street, and the politics of ideas as well as institutions.

Living in a globalised world – DD205

This innovative geography-led course will give you an understanding of some of the challenges of globalised living. Everyday living in today's globalised world can feel challenging, even confusing at times, with distance

no longer a reliable indicator of our involvements in the world.

Welfare, crime and society — DD208
This course examines the relationships between the worlds of social welfare and crime control. It focuses on policy interventions and responses in the UK and around the world to issues such as anti-social behaviour, poverty, discrimination, hate crimes, child labour, health and disease, families, slums, ghettos, and gated communities.

Environment — U216
Environmental issues are a growing source of both collective and individual concern, conflict and challenge. This course provides an integrated approach to the various relationships, processes and activities through which humans and non-humans are linked together.

Crime and justice — DD301
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TOWNS

HIDDEN PASTS, MULTIPLE FUTURES

This booklet accompanies the exciting Open University/BBC television series, *Town with Nicholas Crane*, and related web content on OpenLearn. Uncovering hidden pasts, exploring the diverse geographies and connections that make towns the places that they are today, the series also highlights many of the key issues facing towns and considers some of the different ways in which towns are responding to these as they face contrasting and uncertain futures. Come and explore towns with us!

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Cover image: Located on the River Teme in the Welsh Marches is the historic market town of Ludlow. (Photo by David Goddard/Getty Images)

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